

As CRISPR crops become more common, don't throw GMOs under the bus, scientists warn

Farmers and scientists may be tempted to throw transgenic crops in the trash.

The technology, which has provided benefits to farmers, has been a public relations nightmare and provoked endless discussions about the safety of modern agriculture.

However, before they throw the baby out with the bathwater, people in the agricultural industry need to remember the story of the papaya, says a Penn State biologist.

The ringspot virus nearly destroyed Hawaii's papaya industry as production dropped 50 percent between 1993 and 2006. That changed when Cornell University scientists designed a genetically modified papaya, using a transgene, which protected the fruit from the virus.

Protecting crops from disease is just one reason why the ag industry should stop and ponder the true value of transgenic crops.

"After you start looking at the whole realm of plant science and what we want it to do on this Earth, to sustain us, transgenics are not a tool you want to throw out," said Sally Mackenzie, Huck Chair of Functional Genomics and a plant science professor at Penn State University.

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Investors may be excited about the new technologies, and there's a great deal of hype around gene editing, but there's no such thing as a silver bullet, Mackenzie added.

Gene editing is useful to achieve certain traits, but maybe not powerful enough for something complex like drought-tolerant crops.

There are cases where farmers and society need transgenics.

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